

The Pilgrim's and Puritan's Promise
A joint sermon by the Revs. Robert and Makaanah Morriss
November 20, 2005

Thanksgiving has always been one of my favorite times of year. Part of this is undoubtedly due to the fact that it is a holiday that is focused on fellowship, family, and food as well as on the notion that we should take time to be grateful and give thanks for the bounty in our lives.

I consider myself very lucky to be one of those folks who has had plenty for which to be grateful, and equally important, who has been blessed with a religious community that let me know that an attitude of gratitude was much more conducive to a happy life, than the alternative of focusing on what I didn't have but was certainly encouraged to want by every media outlet to which I was exposed.

While Thanksgiving is not a specifically religious holiday, it definitely has strong roots in the religious experience of the New England Pilgrims who had come to the new world specifically to be able to establish communities where their religious institutions and societal structures both grew out of and were grounded in their sense of covenant with one another rather than on any external hierarchical authority.

The Pilgrims were actually one branch of the "Puritans." "Historically Puritanism began around 1560 in the reign of Queen Elizabeth I as a movement for religious reform. The Early Puritans felt that the Elizabethan ecclesiastical establishment was too political, too compromising, and too Catholic in its liturgy, vestments, and Episcopal hierarch. Calvinist in theology, they demanded scriptural warrant for all details of public worship. They believed that the Scriptures did not sanction the setting up of bishops and churches by the state. The aim of the early Puritans was to purify the church (hence their name), not to separate from it.

"Although Puritans believed that if they searched the Scriptures long enough they would eventually agree, they early differed on the nature of the church polity advised in the Bible. The parish was the unit of the Puritan church; the gathered group of church members elected their ministers. The main group of the Puritans, the Presbyterians, favored a central church government, whereas the minority group of Puritans known as separatists, Independents, or Congregationalists defined the church as any autonomous congregation of believers and emphasized the point that one could arrive at one's own conclusions in religion and opposed a national, comprehensive church." (*Columbia Encyclopedia online*)

Thus the Pilgrim's promise to us was their decision to emigrate and their arrival on the shores of New England in 1620. They were a Puritan group committed to congregational polity and the belief that one could arrive at one's own conclusions in religion. Their success in living through the first year, an accomplishment made possible by the compassionate hospitality of their Native

American neighbors who taught them how to survive, is one aspect of what we celebrate on Thanksgiving.

Their success at actually succeeding in creating a colony in New England, encouraged other Puritans in England, who were still grating under the religious and political restrictions inherent in Britain, to eye emigrating the New World with a more committed eye. These Puritans included the full spectrum – those who were more strict and centralized in their approach to religion as well as those who were the independents and Congregationalists, our direct religious ancestors.

Now I know that viewed by today's standards it's easy to give the Puritans a hard time for some of their behaviors – and like all of us, they were far from perfect. And yet as someone whose life has been centered in a religious institution, of all the things for which I am grateful, the Free Church movement, modeled by the pilgrims and the other Puritans who followed, has got to be one of the things that is close to the top. To help you understand why, let's spend a few minutes considering the religious environment of the 1600s in England, out of which the Free Church movement grew.

First of all, the law required everyone to attend church services every Sunday in their neighborhood parish. The services, about which church members had no say, consisted largely of old ritual usually conducted by ill-educated, ill-trained, and underpaid assistant curates whose sermons were designed to promote stability and acceptance of the hierarchical social structures of the day. When lay folks got excited about reading the Bible and discussing its implications for their lives, particularly the idea that early churches were free from hierarchical control, the bishops shut down their discussions as being dangerous to the established order.

And so, a plan emerged. By establishing the Massachusetts Bay Company, and having it chartered by the King, the hope was that the Puritans could establish a colony sufficiently far from the prying eyes of the establishment that they could create a community modeled on a new way of thinking about society. It was a way that was based in the understanding that what redeems and enhances human life is the spirit of mutual love.

While they kept such practices as compulsory church attendance, this was at least in part out of fear that at any point the King could revoke their charter and the land grant that went with it, and knowing that if he did so, everything they had given their lives to establish could disappear in an instant. Their plan was to stay under the King's radar until they were economically viable and strong enough to make canceling the charter politically impossible. Still, within these constraints, it was a remarkable attempt to see what a community gathered in the name of a covenant of love would look like.

How did this actually develop? Let's take as an example the gathering of the church in Dedham [with much appreciation to Alice Blair Wesley's Minns lectures for making this recounting possible.]

“By 1637 there were about 30 families in Dedham, all recently settled there. They had come

from various parts of England. ...Upon reaching this piece of American wilderness, they first had to design a town government, so they could decide how legally to allot fields for growing crops and smaller lots or the building of houses. Then, with pens built for their animals, initial crops seen to, houses up, furniture unpacked or freshly pegged together,...they began to think of founding a church. But they had been working so hard they really hadn't had time to get to know each other very well, much less talk about what kind of church they should establish. ...

“So,...they set up a series of weekly meetings, ‘lovingly to discourse and consult together... and prepare for spiritual communion in a church society, that they might be further acquainted with the (spiritual) tempers and gifts of one another.’ Meetings were held every Thursday at several houses in rotation with anybody in town who wanted to attend being welcome.

“They adopted a few simple rules for their meetings. Rule 1: They would decide before leaving each meeting what question to discuss next week. That way people were more apt to share considered thoughts. Rule 2: Each week the host of the house would begin, speaking to the agreed upon question. Then everyone else could speak by turns. All individuals could, as they chose, speak to the question, or raise a closely related question and speak to that or state objections or doubts concerning what any others had said, ‘so it were humbly and with a teachable hart not with any mind of caviling or contradicting.’ No arguing. The record reports that all their ‘reasonings’ were ‘very peaceable, loving, and tender, much to edification.’”

The remarkable thing about these meetings is that they followed a process that is almost identical to the process we use for our Chalice Circles today. And the focus of their concern was not just the creation of a church, but with any question pertaining to the establishment of “the just, peaceable, and comfortable proceeding in the civil society.”

The net result is that they gathered a church, based on a covenant of love, democratically run, with each person having an equal voice, and dedicated not only to peace within the parish, but to just and peaceable proceedings in the larger society of which they were a part as well. And they anticipated that this could happen best if they relied on the spirit of love as their guide as mediated through everyone who was willing to take the covenanting process seriously enough to join with them in the creation of their beloved community.

(Makanah)

It is from these roots, from the promise of the Puritans and Pilgrims, that our liberal faith has grown. It is because of these roots that each week we begin our time of worship by reciting our shared covenant together.

Each Sunday Bob or I invite you to remember those roots by the words which we say as we introduce the reciting of the covenant. We say, “We are a gathered religious community and thus it is important that each week as we begin our time of worship, we reaffirm our shared covenant, our promises to one another.”

We wrote those words of introduction eight years ago as we began our ministry here because it is important to acknowledge our shared roots so that we may gain clear and courageous inspiration from them. In this way, each Sunday, we are in a sense returning to our earliest religious ancestors who arrived on the shores of New England to engage in a remarkable religious and community experiment.

And then each Sunday, these words of introduction are followed by our saying together the words of our congregation’s covenant, words chosen by the members of this congregation many, many years ago.

I will readily admit to you that this is one of my most favorite parts of the Sunday service. As I look out and say with you these words, my heart is always filled with gratitude and thanks. Here we all are, each one of us unique, each one of us with our beautifully individual perspectives, gifts, talents, challenges and dreams. Here we are gathered as many minds yet joining as one heart as we say the words of our covenant together.

“Love is the Spirit of this Church and service its cause.
This is our covenant, to dwell together in peace, to seek truth and to help others.”

Many of us have memorized these words. Most of our children and youth have also memorized them. And this is good. No one required us to memorize them, but we memorized them probably almost spontaneously because they are words which seem and feel natural and important and good to say.

Where else do you go in your life where you publicly and from your heart make this kind of promise each week to a group of friends, family and total strangers.

How do these words impact your life? I know they impact mine a great deal. To begin each week making the promise to myself and to you matters to me.

The Pilgrim’s promise, the congregational Puritan’s promise to us has several aspects about which I offer “thanks” on Thanksgiving Day.

(1) Right at the heart of the free church movement which the Puritans established was the spirit of love. And that is central for us as members and friends of this congregation.

(2) The free church that our pilgrim and congregational Puritan ancestors brought into being is entirely self-governing, free from any outside control whatsoever. I am thankful that we as a

congregation determine our own directions and programs and call our own ministers.

(3) “Loyalty to the spirit of love simultaneously commits members of the free church to the best understanding of truth we can attain” (Alice Blair Wesley, *Minns Lecture #2, 2000*), and that means honoring the use of reason in our spiritual/philosophical search. One of the many things I am grateful for in our Unitarian Universalist tradition is our commitment to the use of reason and the findings of science as we explore and struggle with the many challenges of our life journeys.

(4) “Reasoning about what we love, together, and about all the social implications and complexities of such love, in continuous conversation,” (Wesley, *Minns #2, 2000*) consultation and dialogue has been a built-in part of our free church religious tradition since the times of the Pilgrims and congregational Puritans.” We honor a diversity of perspectives, knowing that we grow in wisdom as we listen respectfully to each other. We are committed to agreeing to disagree in ways which do not put one another down. Our differences in points of view are not to be made into personal attacks. On this and every day, I offer thanks for a community in which this is possible, a community which can serve as a model of civility for our often much less than “civil” public society.

(5) And finally the Pilgrims and congregational Puritans give to us a free church that is an organized group not an “organic group.” Those who are members are members because they have chosen to sign our Membership book. They are not members automatically because they happened to have been born in this neighborhood, or because their parents were members. Our congregation is made up of individuals who have searched their minds and hearts and said “yes” I want to formally join with this religious community and I do so with a free heart and mind.

We are here because we want to be here, we chose to be here, we have the privilege of being here, part of our free church heritage given to us by our founding ancestors.

In closing, I’d like to share words adapted from a reading by Pat Walker. They are words which seem to me to be at the heart of who we are as a religious and spiritual and philosophical people. They are words which affirm our different perspectives, our different minds, and our one heart – the spirit and courage of our individual and collective sense of universal connection and love.

“Follow a path that brings Joy to your heart. It is a Path of the sacred.

“Speak a name that brings Thanks to your heart. It is a Name of the Holy.

“Read a text that brings Love to your heart. It is a Source of Sacred Wisdom.

“Say a word that brings Peace to your heart. It will be the word of God.”

For the Pilgrim’s promise that is our free church, I give thanks. Blessed be.